DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 276 IR 051 592

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TITLE Public Libraries and the Challenge of the Learning Society.
INSTITUTION Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 31 Jan 84
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Library and Learning Society Project (Boston, MA, January 31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Computer Literacy; *Educational Improvement; *Library Role; Library Services; Lifelong Learning; *Public Libraries; Shared Library Resources
IDENTIFIERS Boston Public Library MA; *Libraries and the Learning Society; Library Services and Construction Act; National Commission on Excellence in Education; *Nation at Risk (A); Office of Educational Research and Improvement

ABSTRACT

Public libraries can be instrumental in creating a learning society and alleviating the problems pointed out in "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. In fact, public libraries have always played an important role in the nation's education and will continue to do so, both in technology and in the liberal arts. The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) has already funded several projects designed to extend the services of public libraries, e.g., the Public Library Services Program and Interlibrary Cooperation Program, which are Titles I and III of the Library Services and Construction Act. It is imperative now for public libraries to find new ways of accessing and disseminating resources, identify their role in the learning society, and determine ways to increase lifelong learning opportunities. (KM)

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"Public Libraries and the Challenge of the Learning Society"

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January 31, 1984

IR051592

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Good evening.

I wish to extend a welcome to each of you from U.S. Education Secretary T.H. Bell, and on behalf of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement I am proud to have the opportunity to open the public library seminar for the "Libraries and the Learning Society" Project. A busy and challenging agenda faces you, both this evening and tomorrow, so I will keep my remarks brief.

The theme for this seminar is taken from A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report has served to alert the public to an alarming situation---something is seriously wrong with our educational system. While there had been indications over the past two decades that problems existed in the schools, no examination of our schooling system has been as systematic or comprehensive as that completed by the Commission members.

Their analysis was confirmed in whole or in part by subsequent studies of our education system. The findings of the National Commission study and other reports have served to awaken many people throughout our country to the problems within our nation's schools. There exist many serious deficiencies in the educational programs being offered in many of our schools throughout the nation. These problems must be confronted and dealt with by members of the educational community and individuals outside the formal educational structure if we are to, once again, restore the excellence to our schools which for so long we have taken for granted. We must gather our resources and focus on the goal of creating a learning society. The National Commission put the challenge in these words:

> ...In a world of ever accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace, of ever greater danger, and of ever larger opportunities for those prepared to meet them, educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a Learning Society. At the heart of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes.

One of our greatest goal in the United States should be to focus on the creation of and nurturing of a Learning Society. Vital to the learning society are places like libraries "where the individual can develop and mature in work and life." As an educator, a researcher and a historian, I am not a stranger to libraries and know the importance of good public libraries, dedicated librarians, and effective library services to enrich the lives of all of us and bring countless benefits to our communities. They are repositories of our history and heritage, as well as wellsprings for education and self-improvement for millions of Americans. Citizens from every walk of life can participate in the learning society through their public libraries. If our system of public and private education has been greatly responsible for making us a strong and viable educated nation, public libraries cannot be far behind in receiving credit.

One problem may be that we take our public libraries for granted. We are indeed fortunate as a nation to have these unique institutions throughout our country. The public libraries may vary from massive high rise buildings in our bustling urban centers to a one story building or basement of an old building in some of our smaller and more isolated rural towns. Each of those libraries is a storehouse of knowledge--a welcome refuge for the individual seeking to enlighten himself or

herself on the wisdom of the ages, quick references in an encyclopedia, a survey of recent magazines, or the opportunity to enjoy the wide world of fiction.

I came to my present position in 1981 and I am pleased to note that the Office of Educational Research and Improvement has administered several library programs which have had an impact on this nation's outstanding library system and has contributed significantly to the growth and development of State and local public library services.

I wish to especially note that during the past five years, we have been able to award over $890,000 to our host institution--the Boston Public Library. These funds have enabled this outstanding institution to improve preservation of rare materials and to improve their dissemination through microfiche copies.

This library serves as the headquarters for the State's eastern region for which it receives funds under the Major Urban Resource Library allotment from the Library Services and Construction Act, Title I. In addition, as a member of the Boston Library Consortium, the Boston Public Library receives funds under the Library Services and Construction Act through the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, represented here by its director, Mr. Roland Piggford. It is supporting, I understand, what is to be the first automated serials management system in the country providing current holdings information, price information, financial reports, and claiming information.

I would also like to mention some of the other work being supported under the auspices of our Office and how it relates or might relate to the work that you are doing. Some of our largest programs are the Public Library Services Program (Title I) and Interlibrary Cooperation Program (Title III) under the Library Services and Construction Act.

Title I has provided the seed money to foster improved access to public libraries since 1956 when the program began as a rural library services effort. With this Federal help, States boosted their public library State-aid programs so that public libraries could assume an important role in the learning society. Many of the special programs initiated with these funds were designed to broaden the learning society for those who may have been disadvantaged, handicapped, institutionalized, elderly, or who may have had limited English-speaking ability -- all priorities of Title I of the Library Services and Construction Act.

It has been for the most part educators -- classroom teachers, school administrators, college and university professors responsible for teacher training, and sometimes a few parents of students in schools -- who have been taught to be the key players concerned with education and the learning society. Today, we must recognize that education must be a matter of interest to everyone, including librarians; it is an issue of vital concern to all Americans.

There are many reasons why education is receiving a greater focus. One of them is certainly the public's deep concern over the findings of A Nation At Risk. Another is the rapidly changing technologies which

are now, and will even more so in the future, affect how and what we learn. There are many and varied opinions about how and where we learn in this "information age." More and more educators are beginning to recognize the great potential of technology to enhance learning of citizens in schools and libraries. Our Office presently offers its support of these technologies through library resource sharing activities under Title III of the Library Services and Construction Act, fostering linkages among schools, colleges and universities, special library collections, and public libraries in providing learning resources available to all citizens in their communities. Hopefully, through our data collection activities and dissemination and diffusion efforts, libraries will seek to emulate successful State and local examples of shared activities promoting increasing access to learning resources.

Certainly computers will play a vital role in the learning society as noted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. In fact, it is significant to note that the Commission feels that it is already important enough for every student receiving a high school diploma to have at least one half year of computer science. The information and technological needs of a computer literate society has and will continue to create new demands on repositories of information. Libraries have an active part to play in interacting with both traditional students and persons in the search for individual knowledge.

Even those of us who have championed the liberal arts recognize that there is such a thing as a "new liberal arts." The concept of a liberal education has focused on education as serving the inner being of

the individual and the spirit of society rather than just technical and material needs: it caters to the human urge to understand the world in which the individual finds himself in a quest of lifelong learning. The concept of the learning society also encourages individuals in their intellectual pursuits. Public libraries are provided with the unique challenge of attempting to provide opportunities and resources for life-long learning, to the young and old alike.

More than a century and a half ago, Thomas Jefferson said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Education is expensive but ignorance is more costly for any nation. Long an inspiration to many, Jefferson's great personal library attested to the knowledge and information resources that were available to him. Once only the rich or well-born had access to extensive libraries. Greater resources are accessible to every citizen today through the public libraries of our nation. If we are to guard against ignorance in our learning society, it is the responsibility of all of us to make our institutions accessible for these learning opportunities and to make them responsive to new ways to access and disseminate information.

This seminar is the first of five seminars being held to hear your views as representatives of the library community and others who are deeply, both directly and indirectly, involved and concerned with the role of public libraries in education and in a true learning society. You are the key individuals in the field of public libraries. We are

glad you have come together here. This particular group faces the challenge of identifying what role public libraries should play in such a society. Tomorrow should be a day of lively discussion. I look forward to hearing your recommendations. Thank you.